

***Consciousness (with Mutilation)* by Anthony Howell, The Odd Volumes of The Fortnightly Review. Les Brouzils, France, 2019, Paperback, \$18.00/£15.00.**

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*Consciousness (with Mutilation)*, published in 2019, is a semi-autobiographical novel by Anthony Howell, a novelist, performance artist, poet, and founder of The Theatre of Mistakes. Howell has also published *In the Company of Others* (1986), *Oblivion* (2002), and some poetry collections. In *Consciousness (with Mutilation)*, Howell juxtaposes his autobiographical narrative alongside the narrative of Rebecca (his former love interest), and his own interpretation of the excerpts of the novel by the Syrian writer, Mamdouh Adwan.

The writer discusses his understanding of the term, mutilation and how he came to re-crepe the novel of Mamdouh Adwan. In 1971, when the writer had been to Syria, Adwan took him to various tourist places and gifted him his novel, *The Old Man and the Land*. Years later when he read Loy Ajjan's English translation of Adwan's Arabic title, *The Mutilated*, he decided to rename it as *Mutilation*. The choice of the title indicates that the mutilation does not occur just once at one level in one's life, but rather the mutilation is an ongoing continuous phenomenon that affects an individual and a nation at multiple levels, be it physical, psychical, or existential. And this mutilation occurs when one is under the impactful spell of the sleep. Several narratives run parallel to each other in the novel, and each narrative introduces to the readers how sleep paralyses the protagonists.

In Howell's interpretation of Adwan's novel, the land of the villagers of Mansura is mutilated, and so is the identity of the villagers who are either killed by the Israeli soldiers or are forced to flee leaving their homes behind. They sleep as villagers of Mansura one night but wake up the next day as the refugees running around in search of some safe place to save their lives. He keeps emphasizing the statements, "One night, a nation went to sleep as a democracy, and the next morning it woke as a fascist regime. This can happen to a country. This can happen to a family" (Howell 169). In the context of the narrative of Idriss (the only old man alive in Mansura), sleep seems to hold the meaning of a misconception. The term sleep has multiple layers of interpretations in this creative semi-autobiographical work: (1) sleep as a medical condition, (2) sleep as a misconception, and (3) sleep as a naivety. It is a medical condition for the writer, since he is gripped by the unexpected series of seizures. For Rebecca, sleep appears to be a sort of child's naivety since as a young girl, she is unprepared and ignorant of the possibility of being abused by her own family members.

Howell's semi-fictional novel, *Consciousness (with Mutilation)*, was published in 2019 by The Fortnightly Review. This creative piece is inspired by the writer's personal experience of being gripped and disciplined by the seizures in a certain way. Therefore, the varied narratives compiled in this novel are the narratives of the characters who undergo the process of being disciplined by their respective autarchs. The narrator/writer himself is disciplined and controlled by the sleep. No matter what the narrator plans for himself, the seizure dictates his body, disciplines it and coerces it to submit to the grasp of the consequential sleep. I have intentionally employed the term dictates, because the sleep that follows the fits is coercively prescribed by them to the body of the narrator. I will elaborate the argument by discussing the etymological origin of the term, "dictate," which is derived from the Latin word "*dictare*" (Online Etymology Dictionary 2020), meaning to prescribe. Submission to the sleep is coercive prescription administered by the seizures to the narrator. The same holds true for Rebecca, who after suffering from abusive childhood migrates to Israel to join the armed forces. After joining the Israeli Defence Force, her body is disciplined, and she transforms from being a fat, invisible girl into a soldier that, "has become something that can be made; out of a formless clay, an inapt body...a calculated constraint runs slowly through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times, turning silently into the automatism of habit..." (Foucault 135). Rebecca's mind is also disciplined by the IDF along with her body. Rebecca's narrative is circular in nature because over a period of time she, too, becomes the perpetrator of violence, of abuse, when she becomes the soldier in The Israeli Defence Force. The narrative of Idriss does not escape the aspect of being disciplined.

The novel begins with the analogy drawn between the way the narrator controls his polo pony (Steeldust) and the way sleep controls him. The narrator describes the relationship with his pony as of "Leader and follower" (Howell 1). The narrator states that during dressage, he feels like he is dancing tango with his pony. Just as he controls his pony during dressage, the seizures and the consequential sleep controls the narrator. The understanding of Tango as a dance that disciplines the body to obey is drawn from Badiou's idea of dance, "as an external constraint imposed upon a supple body" (2005, 59). Badiou's interpretation of dance examines the submission of the "obedient" (59) body to "its own principle" (58). Stretching the analogy of Badiou's understanding of dance that demands submission, I would like to state that the sleep induced as a result of seizures also demands the corporeal submission, in order to open up the possibility of the art being inscribed in the psyche of the narrator. The sleep facilitates a stage for the performance of the Theater of Mutilation. Each episode and variety of sleep represented in all the narratives demonstrates the mutilation of the protagonist's "acquainted

self,” and every episode of sleep transforms these respective protagonists into a “yet-to-be-known” version of self. The writer himself assumes the roles of the different known and unknown people and performs these roles as long as the theatre of mutilation lasts. The writer believes that the sleep which seizes his “previous self” and transforms him into someone else, possibly his girlfriend Rebecca, or as some celebrity, or as one of his uncles. He doesn’t see his life as a river, but rather as, “a collage of dreams and realities” (Howell 2).

One of the striking features of the novel is the incorporation of concentric polyphony. The writer, who is also the narrator, while painting the verbal picture of his suffering also juxtaposes the narratives of other characters. Interestingly, the readers not only read the portrayal of these characters through the writer’s perspective, but they also speak for themselves. And that is where the novel stops being non-fictional. It is a semi-fictional, semi-autobiographical novel. The writer’s craftsmanship lies at designing his literary work as a collage, just as he sees his life. The intention of the writer seems to be to convey to his readers, the discomfort he feels while jumping from conscious state to another that seem like two disparate realities. The episodes of seizure that put the writer/narrator to sleep creates a rupture in the continuity of his life. Sleep appears to be like a theatre of mutilation for him. Once the episode of seizure lulls him to sleep, he assumes the role of different characters, builds up narratives around them, and leads different lives. On waking up, he doesn’t know who he really is. “It seems only yesterday that I was Martin Rosenbluth, preparing for the evening’s meeting and discussing current affairs and our Zionist predicament with someone who became a lifelong friend and colleague, Nahum Goldmann” (Howell 14).

Moreover, when he wakes from the episode of seizure, he feels helpless finding himself in the nappies in the hospital. The sleep leaves a gap between two conscious states for him. And the readers feel the same the irritation when the narrator jumps from his narrative of being seized by the sleep to the narratives of the countries like Syria, Israel, and Palestine seized by the invading armies. Howell’s novel incorporates his interpretation of the excerpts from Mamdouh Adwan’s *Mutilation*, which was first published in 1971. Howell’s interpretation of Adwan’s *Mutilation* limns the horrific picture of villagers of Mansura gradually fleeing to safe havens leaving their houses, fields, and other belongings behind. Apparently, Idriss is the only man who decides to stay in the village with his cow. The narrative of Idriss is similar to the narrative of Howell, who is seized by the sleep. Just as Idriss feels lonely in Mansura, Howell feels lonely in his suffering since he is unable to explain his fears of being transformed into someone else or being attacked by Mossad, to anyone. Idriss is the lone survivor in Mansura, who fights not only against his loneliness but also against the Israeli soldiers who keep coercing

him to leave the village. The narrator (who suffers from the seizures) juxtaposes his narrative as a lone sufferer to that of Idriss's, so that the readers can compare the gravity and nuances of loneliness portrayed in the two narratives. Keeping in view his confrontation with the seizures that induce transformational sleep, he wonders about what can this metaphorical or the biological sleep steal from the ones who are under its hex. I will further elaborate the connection between the motif of stealing described in the novel with the concept of sleep.

The narrator also confesses his guilt of stealing money from his mother through his poems within the novel. The trope of stealing is an integral component his narrative. It is not just he who steals from his mother. The narrative suggests that, too, have various things from him. In the poem, he enlists all the things stolen from him like the wooden figurines of the cow, his bottle of Ribena, Senna kilim, etc. and the larger picture of his narrative connects his material loss with the loss of the "acquainted self" during seizure. The episodes of stealing his mother's money impact him to such an extent that the experience of guilt makes him incapacitate to perform the mathematical operation of subtraction as a child. He stolen amount that gets subtracted from his mother's savings adds to his guilt and also adds to his inability to subtract. The narrative also demonstrates how diseases and suicides can subtract the members from the family as well as several components of your own self. He mentions his mother's memory loss owing to Dementia. The narrative of Rebecca, the narrator's previous love interest, shows how she learns to view her "self" after being raped by her own grandfather. Here again the trope of stealing plays a vital role because the etymological origin of the word, rape is derived from the Latin word "*rapere*" (Online Etymology Dictionary) which literally means to plunder or to rob. The very episode of the villagers of Mansura being robbed off of their agricultural land by the Israeli soldiers represented in Howell's interpretation of Adwan's *Mutilation*, showcases the mutilation of the villagers' sense of belongingness, their identity, their notion of peaceful life, and so on and so forth. These separate narratives run parallel to that of the writer's own narrative, wherein his acquainted self is being plundered by the sleep. The analysis of the aspect of stealing would be incomplete if I do not discuss the consequential inability of the writer to carry out subtractions, possibly having arisen out of the guilt of stealing.

The writer's inability to perform the arithmetic procedure of subtraction, brings into discussion Badiou's interpretation of subtraction. "I name subtraction the affirmative part of negation" ("Destruction, Negation, Subtraction- on Pier Paolo Pasolini"). In his lecture delivered in a Graduate Seminar at the Art Centre College of Design in Pasadena on February 6, 2007, Badiou explains with the help of the illustration of Shönberg's musical notes that set

the framework of new musical coherence. The novelty of the musical notes created by Schönberg is not achieved by the disintegration of the previous framework. In fact, Badiou expounds that these musical notes are set outside the traditional framework and therefore follow a novel system of coherence. Just as Schönberg's music is set outside the conventional framework, the paradoxical architectonics of the narrator's sleep, followed by the seizures, subtracts the narrator's agency to resist the drowsiness. However, it is the same architectonics that ruptures his corporeal material experience of the environment that surrounds him and sets the stage for the performance of mutilation.

Moreover, it is ironic that the writer who cannot perform arithmetic subtractions, has artistically subtracted the aspect of chronological sequencing of events in the narratives. The narrator's pathography oscillates between the unexpected visits to the hospital in the old age and the planned vacations with his mother, uncles and cousins to various destinations of historical importance. The narrative of Idriss meets an expected end, wherein he is put to sleep forever by a bullet shot by an Israeli soldier. In a moment, this permanent sleep transforms him from a struggling farmer to a cadaver. Rebecca's narrative comprises of flashbacks and the shift between the present and the past takes place unexpectedly, since the reader comes back to her narrative only after reading a different, parallel, annexed narrative. Howell's experimentation with the narrative style brings forth the question regarding the framework of the thoughts that arise in one's mind while they are conscious.

Howell asks several questions within the novel as well, but he doesn't answer them himself. He leaves it for the readers to find answers or to add to the list of questions he has made. His novel portrays several narratives wherein each character suffers either from psychic, physical, or existential mutilation and each narrative along with mutilating the conventional writing style, also mutilates the general understanding of sleep, consciousness, and self.

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